CourTools

Trial Court Performance Measures

M6

Reliability and Integrity of Case Files

National Center for State Courts   **courtools.org**

Measure 6
Reliability and Integrity of Case Files

Definition

The percentage of case files that meet established standards for completeness and accuracy. Case files can be in electronic and paper format.

Purpose

A reliable and accurate case file management system is fundamental to the effectiveness of day-to-day court operations and fairness of judicial decisions. Many courts use electronic case management systems (CMS), while others maintain paper records or have a hybrid system of paper and electronic records. Regardless of the format, an essential function of the court is to create and maintain an accurate record of pleadings, decisions, and proceedings of the court. The maintenance of case records directly affects the timeliness and integrity of case processing. This measure considers the processes and docket entries that affect the calculation of *M2 Clearance Rates, M3 Time to Disposition, and M4 Age of Pending Caseload*.

This measure provides information regarding (1) how long it takes to retrieve paper records (if applicable), (2) whether the case file's contents and case summary information match up, (3) the organization and completeness of the information in the case file, and (4) the accuracy of the case status in electronic systems.

Element 1: Retrieving Paper Files

Element 2: Content Reliability

Element 3: File Organization and Completeness

Element 4: Case Status Accuracy

Element 1: Retrieving Paper Files (for paper-only and hybrid systems)

This element examines how long it takes to retrieve case files with paper records. Consider only how to retrieve paper case files for this review, even if some records in the file are available in an electronic format.

This measure assumes that retrieving case files is not a concern if all case files are stored electronically. **For electronic-only case files, skip to Element 2.**

Key Questions

1. **How many paper case files can be located?**
2. **How quickly can paper case files be retrieved?**

Method:

Identify an equal number (but at least 50) of each type of paper record that exists in your court to retrieve, such as:

- pending paper case files;
- closed on-site paper case files;
- closed off-site paper case files.

Randomly select that number of case files (e.g., case or docket numbers) with paper records in each case type being evaluated. Record how long it takes to find the paper record for each case file. Felony closed on-site paper case files are shown as an example below.

Paper File Retrieval Data Collection Form

	Random case #s	0-15 minutes	16-30 minutes	31-60 minutes	61+ minutes	Not Found
Case Type: **Criminal Felony** Sample Size: **50** File Type: **Closed, on-site paper**	SC-F-136	X				
	SC-F-468		X			
	SC-F-771		X			
	...	...	...	...	...	...
	SC-F-863			X		
	SC-F-979	X				
	Total Files	40	6	2	2	0

Add the number of Xs in each column. To compute the percentages, divide each column total by the grand total number of files in the sample.
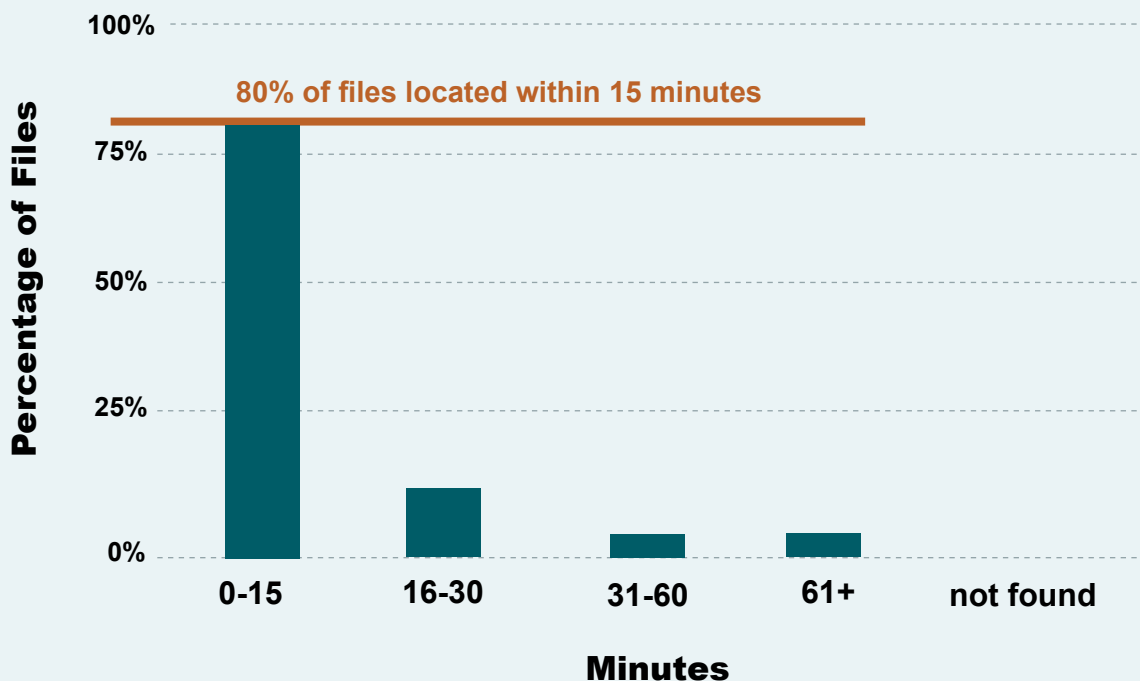
In this example, a total of 40 files were located in 0-15 minutes out of the grand total of 50 files retrieved. The percentage is 40 divided by 50, or 80 percent.

Analysis and Interpretation

In this example, the court determines that 100 percent of the closed, on-site Criminal-Felony paper case files were located, and 80% of those were located within the court's time standard of 15 minutes. Court staff and management need to evaluate why the remaining case files could not be located within this time frame, and determine if this result suggests changes that should be made in the court's records management practices.

Courts should establish a high standard for being able to locate their paper case files, e.g., 98 percent or more. A similar high standard should be defined for locating paper case files within a set time frame (e.g., 90 percent or more of pending and closed on-site paper files located within 15 minutes and 90 percent of the off-site files within one working day).

Percentage of Files Retrieved

80% of files located within 15 minutes

Y-axis: **Percentage of Files** (100%, 75%, 50%, 25%, 0%)

X-axis: **Minutes** (0-15, 16-30, 31-60, 61+, not found)

Element 2: Content Reliability

This element examines the extent of correspondence between the case file summary and the file contents. The case file summary may be called the case docket, case file register, register of actions, etc. The content and format of the case file summary varies across jurisdictions, but this summary page generally includes at least a complete record of the documents filed and proceedings held by the court for each case.

Key Questions:

1. **Does the summary of documents accurately reflect all the documents filed with the court in this case?**
2. **Are the documents in the file accurately recorded on the summary of documents?**
3. **Does the entry match the document?**

Method:

Identify an equal number (but at least 50) of each type of case file that exists in your court to review, such as:

- pending electronic case files;
- closed electronic case files;
- pending paper case files;
- closed on-site paper case files;
- closed off-site paper case files.

Randomly select that number of case files (e.g., case or docket numbers) in each case type being evaluated (e.g. domestic, criminal-felony). The same sample of case files selected in Element 1 can be used, if applicable. Felony pending and closed cases (in an electronic system) are shown as an example.

For each case file, review the case file summary and the case file contents. Record the answers to the following questions for each case file on a data collection form:

1. Does every document-related entry on the case file summary have a corresponding document in the electronic or paper case file?
2. Is every document in the electronic and paper case file listed as an entry on the case file summary system?

3. Does the description of the document in the case file summary match the electronic or paper document?

   o **Yes:** the description matches (e.g., a sentencing order is described as a sentencing order)

   o **No:** the description does not match (e.g., "Order-other" is entered when a more specific order type is available)

Content Reliability Data Collection Form

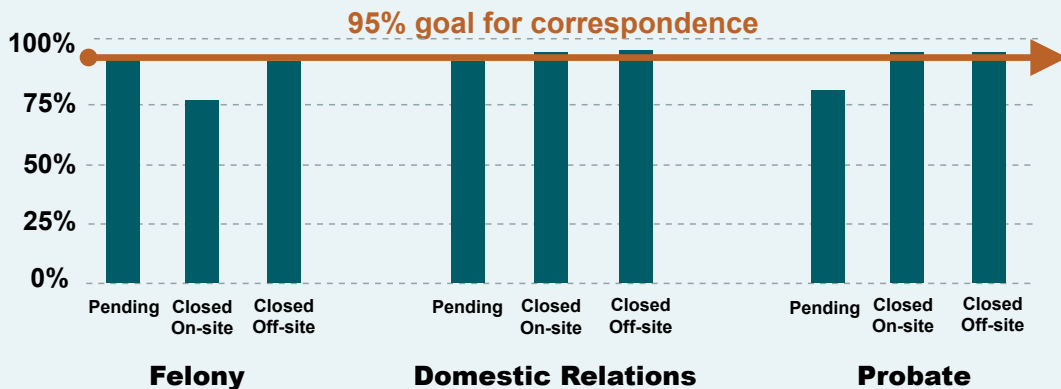|	Random case #s	Each entry has a document in the case file		Each document has an entry in the summary		Each description matches the document		Total
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes/Yes/Yes
Case Type: **Criminal Felony**	SC-F-136	X		X		X		X
	SC-F-468	X		X		X		X
Sample Size: **50**	SC-F-771		X	X			X	
	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
File Type: **Closed, electronic**	SC-F-863	X			X		X	
	SC-F-979	X		X		X		X
	Total Files	48	2	44	6	40	10	35

Add the number of Xs in each column. Calculate the percentage of cases for which "Yes" was answered for the three questions.

In this example, of the grand total of 50 case files examined, a total of 48 case files have a document for **each** entry in the summary. A total of 44 case files have an entry in the summary for **each** document in the file. In a total of 40 case files, the document descriptions in the summary match the document. Thus, not all entries have documents, not all documents have entries, and not all document descriptions match the document. Only 35 of the 50 files examined meet the Yes/Yes/Yes condition. To compute the percentage, divide the total Yes/Yes/Yes (35) by the grand total of files examined (50). The result is 70 percent.
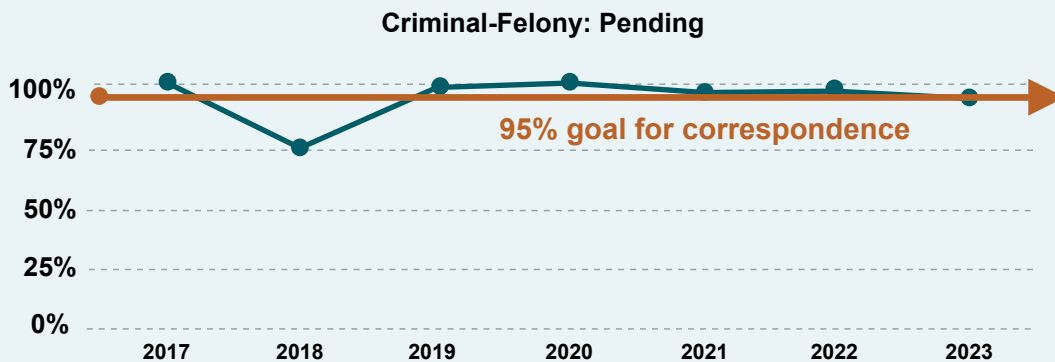
Analysis and Interpretation

In this example, the court has set a content reliability standard of 95 percent correspondence between the summary list of documents and the documents themselves in all case types, regardless of their status (pending, closed). In this court, only pending files and closed files since 2017 are included in the electronic case management system (CMS). Looking at Felony cases, closed on-site (i.e., in the CMS) case files are not currently meeting the court's standard of 95%.

Correspondence between case file summary and contents

95% goal for correspondence

Bar chart showing correspondence percentages for Felony, Domestic Relations, and Probate case types, each with Pending, Closed On-site, and Closed Off-site categories. A horizontal line marks the 95% goal. Felony: Pending ~95%, Closed On-site ~77%, Closed Off-site ~95%. Domestic Relations: Pending ~95%, Closed On-site ~97%, Closed Off-site ~97%. Probate: Pending ~80%, Closed On-site ~95%, Closed Off-site ~95%.

Data can also be analyzed over time (e.g., annually) to see if performance is consistent, improving, or declining. In the example below, the court met its standard in 2017, experienced a sharp decline, then recovered and maintained its standard. The precise reasons for variation in performance (e.g., changes in personnel, technology, procedures, facilities, workflow) need to be determined by court staff and management to determine if corrective action is necessary.

Correspondence between case file summary and contents

Criminal-Felony: Pending

Line chart showing correspondence percentages from 2017 to 2023. A horizontal line marks the 95% goal for correspondence. 2017: ~100%, 2018: ~75%, 2019: ~100%, 2020: ~100%, 2021: ~97%, 2022: ~100%, 2023: ~95%.

Element 3: File Organization and Completeness

This element considers whether the file contents are organized and formatted according to established practice in the jurisdiction. It also explores the completeness of the file—whether key documents filed with the court are contained in the case file. Element 2, Content Reliability, looks for consistency between the case file contents and case file summary. Element 3 looks for documents missing from both the case file summary and the file contents.

Key Questions:

1. **Are file contents organized and formatted according to established practice in the jurisdiction?**
2. **Are file contents complete?**

Method:

For each sample of case files being examined, review the organization or completeness of the case files. The specific criteria for judging the organization and completeness of case files may vary across courts. The first step is to identify 5 to 7 criteria that are appropriate for the specific court and case type. For example, has there been an issue with confidential electronic documents being properly identified and sealed or redacted? Have specific documents (e.g., complaint, answer, motion, judgment) been found missing in the past? Other criteria might include whether the documents filed with the court have been submitted and processed correctly (e.g., correctly captioned).

Once the criteria are defined by the court for each case type, examine each of the files in the sample of cases selected, record whether the files meet the criteria, and summarize the findings on a data collection form. Civil contract closed electronic case files are shown as an example.

File Organization and Completeness Data Collection Form

		Organization			Completeness		
Case Type: **Civil Contract** Sample Size: **50** File Type: **Closed, electronic**	Random case #s	Confidential Documents	Date/ Time Stamp	Correct Caption	Complaint	Proof of Service	Order/ Judgment
	SC-F-136	X	X	X	X		X
	SC-F-468	X	X	X	X	X	
	SC-F-771	X	X		X	X	X
	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	SC-F-863	X	X		X		X
	SC-F-979	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Total Files	50	50	47	50	40	44

Add the number of Xs in each column. Calculate the percentage of cases for which each criterion was met.

In this example, of the grand total of 50 files examined, a total of 50 files have correctly identified and sealed Confidential Documents. A total of 50 files have documents with a correct Date/ Time Stamp; a total of 47 files have documents with a Correct Caption, and so on. To compute the percentages, divide the total files in each column by the grand total of files examined (50). For Confidential Documents, the percentage is 50 divided by 50, or 100 percent. For Correct Caption files, 47 divided by 50 is 94 percent.
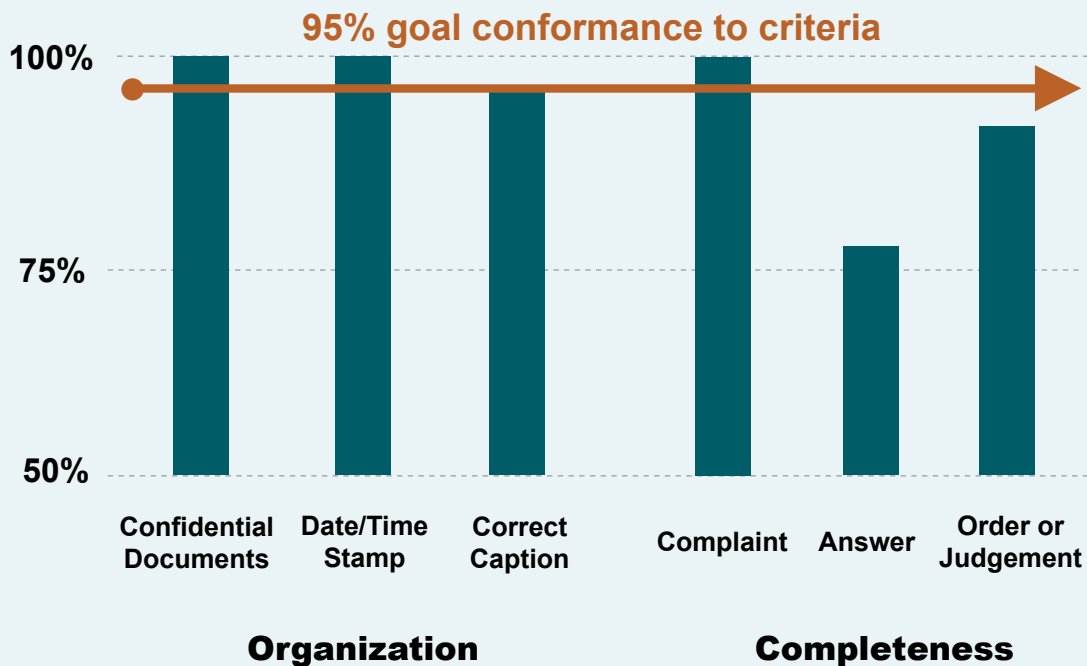
Analysis and Interpretation

Shown here are the hypothetical results of one court's examination of files for six court-specific criteria for closed, civil-contract case files stored electronically.

Interpreting the results of this measure depends on the nature of the specific criteria and the importance of each criterion to the court's records management system.

The nature of the criteria will suggest corrective actions (e.g., clarification/ communication regarding filing requirements to parties or attorneys, or new staff procedures to address the specific deficiency). The initial measurement also serves as a baseline for setting intermediate and long-term targets of performance.

Conformance to Criteria

95% goal conformance to criteria

100%

75%

50%

| Confidential Documents | Date/Time Stamp | Correct Caption | Complaint | Answer | Order or Judgement |

Organization   **Completeness**

Element 4: Case Status Accuracy

The fourth element of this measure looks at whether the case status for each case (open/pending, inactive, disposed/closed, disposed and set for review, or problem solving court) is accurate in the case file summary. Unless the local jurisdiction has their own rules for setting the case status, the *National Open Court Data Standards* and the *State Court Guide to Statistical Reporting* are good references to help courts establish criteria for when these statuses should be recorded.

Key Questions:

1. **Does the case file summary or CMS accurately reflect the status of the case?**
2. **Are statistical reports of the number of cases open/pending, disposed, inactive, set for review, or assigned to a problem-solving court accurate?**

Method:

For each sample of case files being examined, review the case file status and the case file contents. Felony closed electronic case files are shown as an example.

For each case file, record the answers to the following questions on a data collection form:

● Is a case status recorded?

● Is the current status of the case correct? For example, if a final order has been entered, is the status "disposed/closed"? If the case is currently in federal bankruptcy court or if there is an outstanding warrant, is the status "inactive"?

Case Status Accuracy Data Collection Form

Case Type: **Criminal Felony** Sample Size: **50** File Type: **Pending, electronic**	Random case #s	Case status is recorded	Case status is correct
	SC-F-136	X	X
	SC-F-468	X	
	SC-F-771	X	X
	...	...	...
	SC-F-863	X	X
	SC-F-979	X	
	Total Files	**48**	**38**

Add the number of Xs in each column. Calculate the percentage of cases for which "Yes" was answered.

In this example, of the grand total of 50 files examined, a total of 48 cases files have a case status indicated. A total of 38 files have a case status that matches the correct status of the case based upon the last action or event in the case, while 10 cases have a case status that does not match the event or document entry.

Analysis and Interpretation

In this example, the court has set a case status accuracy standard of 95 percent correspondence between the last entry on the case summary or in the CMS to the case status used for statistical reports. This correspondence standard applies in all case types, regardless of their status (pending, closed) or the file location (electronic, paper on-site, paper off-site). In this court, open/pending case files are in the electronic CMS.

The felony pending case files are currently meeting the court's standard. Civil electronic files do not meet the standard. Many cases with a status of "open" should have had a status of closed based upon the last event or document entries. These are impacting the courts statistical caseload measures (e.g., active pending).

Correspondence between case file summary and status in CMS
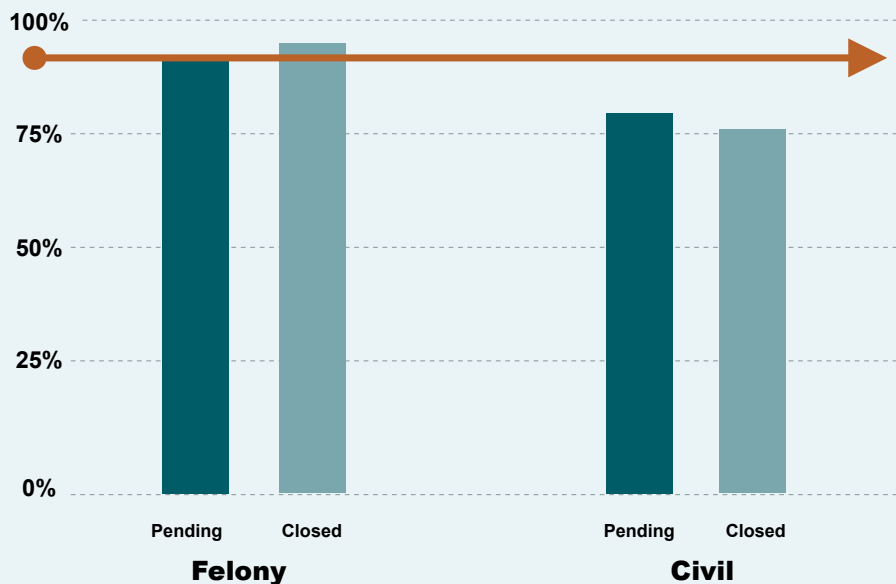
Data can also be analyzed over time (e.g., annually) to see if performance is consistent, improving, or declining. In the example below, the court surpassed its standard by 2020, experienced a decline, then recovered in 2023. The precise reasons for variation in performance (e.g., changes in personnel, technology, procedures, facilities, workflow) need to be determined by court staff and management to determine if corrective action is necessary.

Criminal-Felony: Pending (electronic)
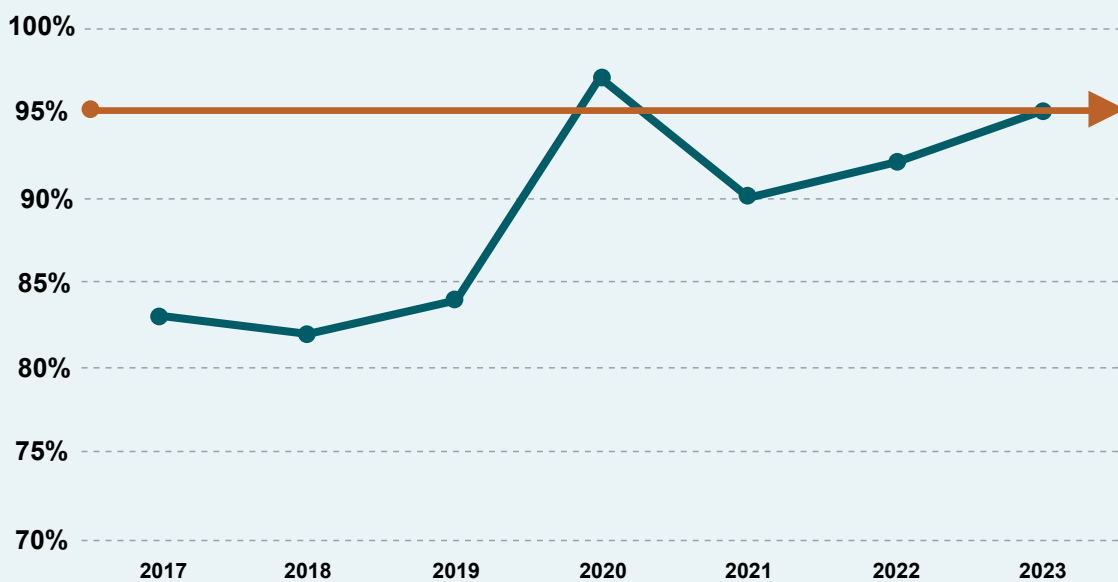
Terms You Need to Know

Closed cases

Cases that have been disposed of by the court, regardless of the manner of disposition.

Electronic case files

Case files that are stored electronically in the court's case management system(s).

Hybrid case files/hybrid system

Case files that are stored both electronically in the court's case management system(s) and in paper form.

Off-site case files

Paper case files that are stored in a building or facility other than the site of the court division responsible for those files.

On-site case files

Paper case files that are stored in the same building as the court division responsible for those files.

Pending cases

Cases that are awaiting disposition by the court.

Random Sample

A sample chosen that minimizes bias in the selection process. A random sample of case files could be generated by a computer, or by picking one file on a random basis, and choosing additional files at evenly spaced intervals (choosing every tenth file on the shelves, in ascending order) until the desired total number of files is obtained. Systematic random samples require the taking of every nth case, i.e., if the total number of civil cases in a court was 3,000 and the sample size was to be 300 cases, select every tenth case (3,000 ÷ 300 = 10).

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